

WAS BRUCE LEE A GOOD FIGHTER, OR SIMPLY A GOOD TALKER?

Experts Analyze Lee's Fighting Skills

by Thomas Nilsson

Most people remember martial arts legend Bruce Lee as an invincible superman. Twenty years after his untimely passing, tales of Lee's otherworldly combat skills continue to circulate throughout the martial arts community.

Yet, there are a skeptical few who have leveled criticism at Lee, claiming that the *jeet kune do* stylist talked a good game, but never actually fought anybody. Therefore, they say, how does anyone really know what kind of fighter Lee was?

Was Lee just a showman who did his fighting on the big screen, or could he actually take apart a roomful of bad guys, as he so often did in the movies? True, he never fought in martial arts tournaments; he didn't believe one should fight simply for the sake of a trophy. Lee took his martial arts much more seriously, and he studied, investigated and trained like a man possessed. But that still doesn't mean he could beat someone up if the situation presented itself.

Lee brought the martial arts into the public consciousness in 1966 with his role as Kato in the *Green Hornet* television series. By the time of his sudden and tragic death in 1973, he had almost single-handedly refined and revolutionized the

martial arts. His films, including the classic *Enter the Dragon*, are still the standard by which other martial arts movies are measured.

But Lee's tremendous success as a film star may, ironically enough, have indirectly led to his credibility problem as a true fighter. He became a sort of comic-book hero, a caricature, a supernatural avenger created by the film industry. The man behind the myth was allowed to be lost.

Lee's death catapulted him to instant immortality. He became the incomparable fighter, even though most people had never seen him in actual combat. And his reputation grew as the years passed. But was it deserved? Was Lee simply a product of his films, or could he beat the daylights out of a mugger if the need arose? Perhaps a closer look at the pre-Hollywood Lee will offer a clearer picture of the martial artist's actual fighting skills.

Although Lee never competed in tournaments—often used as a yardstick for

Those who claim that Bruce Lee never "fought for real" fail to realize that Lee's regular workouts included full-contact sparring sessions (1) and boxing drills (2) using a focus mitt held by a partner.

one's fighting ability—he did most certainly fight for real on occasion. He had a history of fighting dating back to his childhood in Hong Kong. As a child, Lee was thin and somewhat sickly looking, but despite his appearance, he often wound up in streetfights and, by most reports, he rarely won. Lee's father, Li Hoi-Chuen, was well aware of his son's early lack of fighting prowess and, together, they started practicing *tai chi chuan*. Slowly, young Bruce began to change, both physically and mentally. Later on, as a teenager and hotheaded *wing chun* kung fu practitioner under the legendary Yip Man, Lee would roam the streets of Hong Kong with his friends, picking fights and creating trouble. As Lee once told a Hong Kong newspaper, "I was a troublemaker—aggressive and bad-tempered. Whenever I met anyone that I didn't like, I'd keep saying to myself 'I'll challenge him, I'll challenge him!'"

Los Angeles-based wing chun instructor Hawkins Cheung was a childhood friend of Lee in 1950s Hong Kong and recalls seeing Bruce fight on many occasions. "We both trained in wing chun under Yip Man," Cheung states. "We practiced every day. The kind of wing chun we



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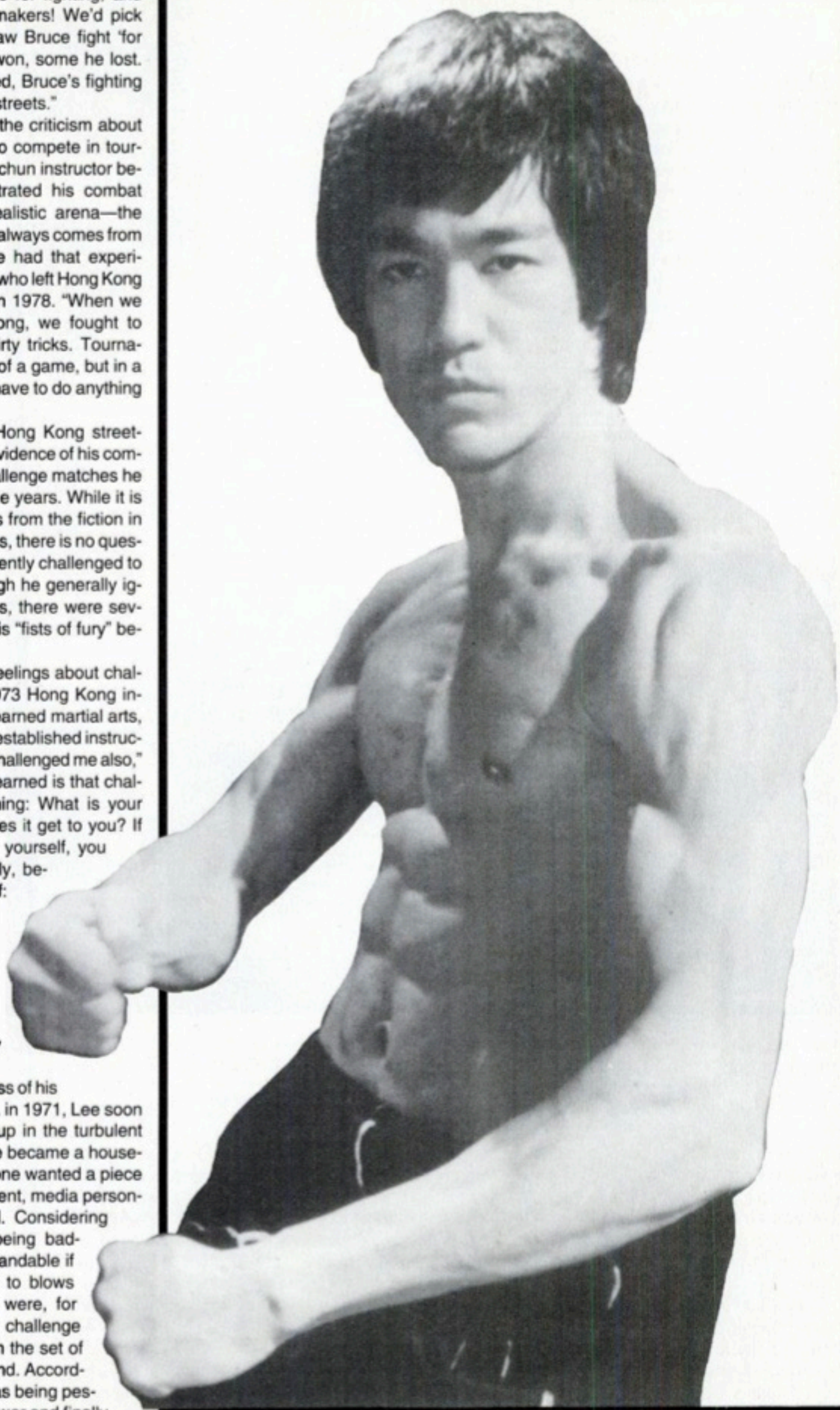
learned back then was for fighting, and yes, we were troublemakers! We'd pick fights all the time. I saw Bruce fight 'for real.' Some fights he won, some he lost. As far as I'm concerned, Bruce's fighting [skills] came from the streets."

Cheung has heard the criticism about Lee's "unwillingness" to compete in tournaments, but the wing chun instructor believes Bruce demonstrated his combat prowess in a more realistic arena—the streets. "A good fighter always comes from experience, and Bruce had that experience," relates Cheung, who left Hong Kong for the United States in 1978. "When we were kids in Hong Kong, we fought to survive, with lots of dirty tricks. Tournament fighting is a kind of a game, but in a real-life situation, you have to do anything you can to survive."

In addition to the Hong Kong street-fights, Lee presented evidence of his combat skills in several challenge matches he was forced into over the years. While it is difficult to sort the facts from the fiction in regard to these matches, there is no question that Lee was frequently challenged to fights in public. Although he generally ignored these challenges, there were several occasions when his "fists of fury" began to fly.

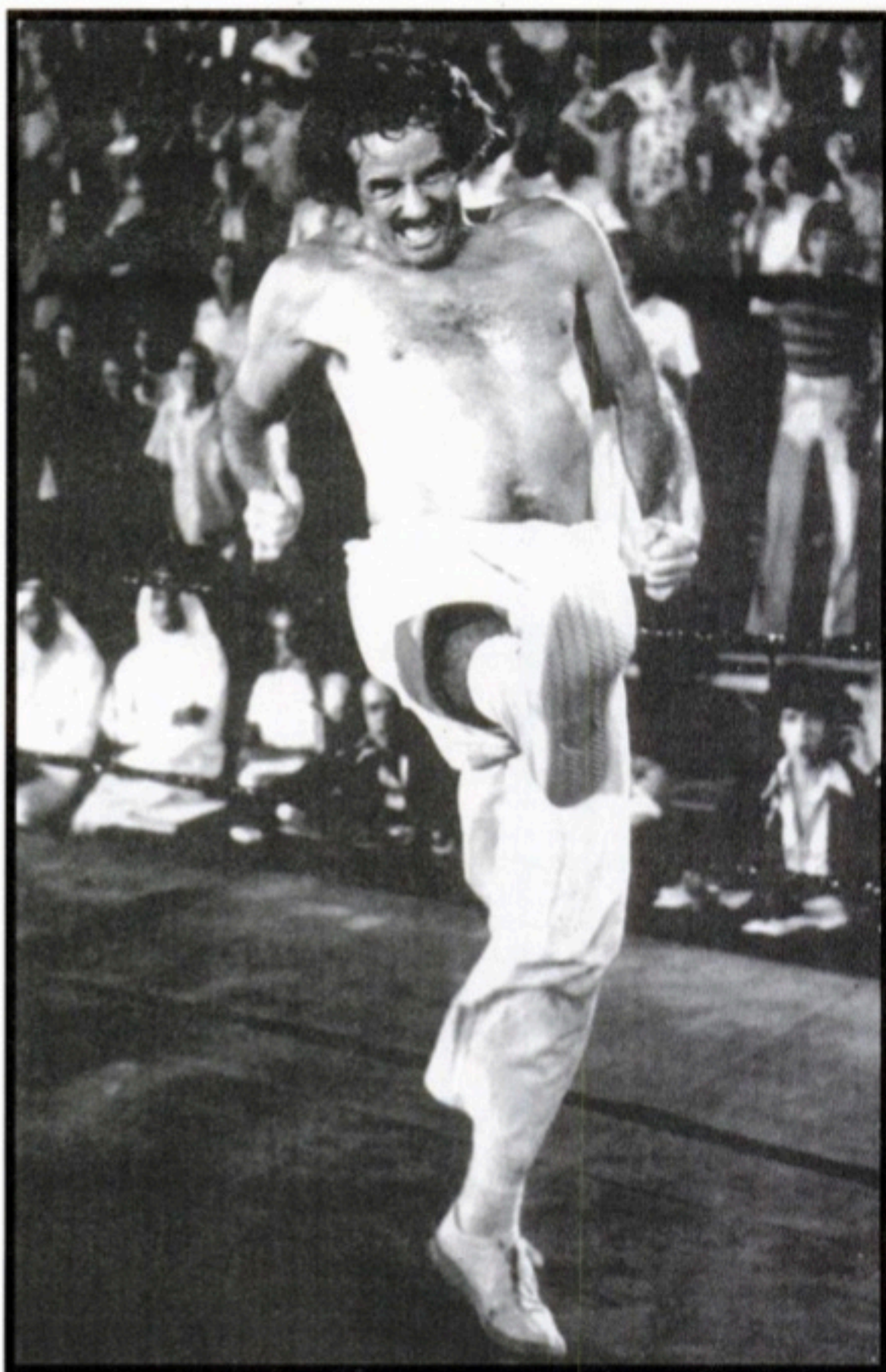
Lee explained his feelings about challenge matches in a 1973 Hong Kong interview. "When I first learned martial arts, I too challenged many established instructors, and some others challenged me also," Lee said. "But what I learned is that challenging means one thing: What is your reaction to it? How does it get to you? If you are secure within yourself, you treat it very, very lightly, because you ask yourself: 'Am I really afraid of this man? Do I have that doubt within myself that he is going to get me?' If I don't have such fear, I would certainly treat it very lightly."

Following the success of his first film, *The Big Boss*, in 1971, Lee soon found himself caught up in the turbulent Asian media circus. He became a household name, and everyone wanted a piece of him. Wherever he went, media personnel and fans followed. Considering Lee's reputation for being bad-tempered, it is understandable if he occasionally came to blows with someone. There were, for instance, rumors of a challenge match that occurred on the set of *The Big Boss* in Thailand. According to the story, Lee was being pestered by a local Thai boxer and finally



agreed to accept the fighter's challenge—a clash that Lee won.

It is a well-known fact that Lee was frequently challenged on the set of *Enter the Dragon*. Real estate investor, actor and former tournament fighter Bob Wall witnessed one of these fights and recalls how the incident came to blows. "There was this young Chinese guy working as one of the extras on the film," relates Wall, who played one of Lee's opponents in *Enter the Dragon*. "During a break, this guy was talking with a bunch of friends. I understand a bit of Cantonese, and I overheard them discussing Bruce's martial arts skills. This loudmouth kept baiting Bruce and finally said 'I reckon you only act out your fighting. You're not for real!' Bruce, who was often challenged in Hong Kong, kept cool, but eventually got tired of the comments. He finally pointed at the guy and sharply said 'You! Come on down. Now!' The guy attacked Bruce, and he was good, I mean *real* good. But Bruce played with him for a couple of minutes,



Bob Wall (above), who appeared with Bruce Lee (above left) in several films, recalls how Lee responded to an antagonist's challenge on the set of *Enter the Dragon*, beating the man silly.

then slapped him around until the guy was all bloody and messed up. After the fight, the Chinese guy never uttered another word about Lee 'only fighting for the movies' again!"

Only a handful of Lee's challenge matches have been verified. Two such incidents stand above the rest: the fight that occurred in San Francisco in the mid-1960s, and another bout that took place in Seattle not long after Lee arrived there in 1959.

Lee's martial arts philosophy was not always shared by his contemporaries, and it was at the root of the incident in San Francisco. A few months after he and his friend James Lee opened a school on Broadway Street, a local kung fu instruc-

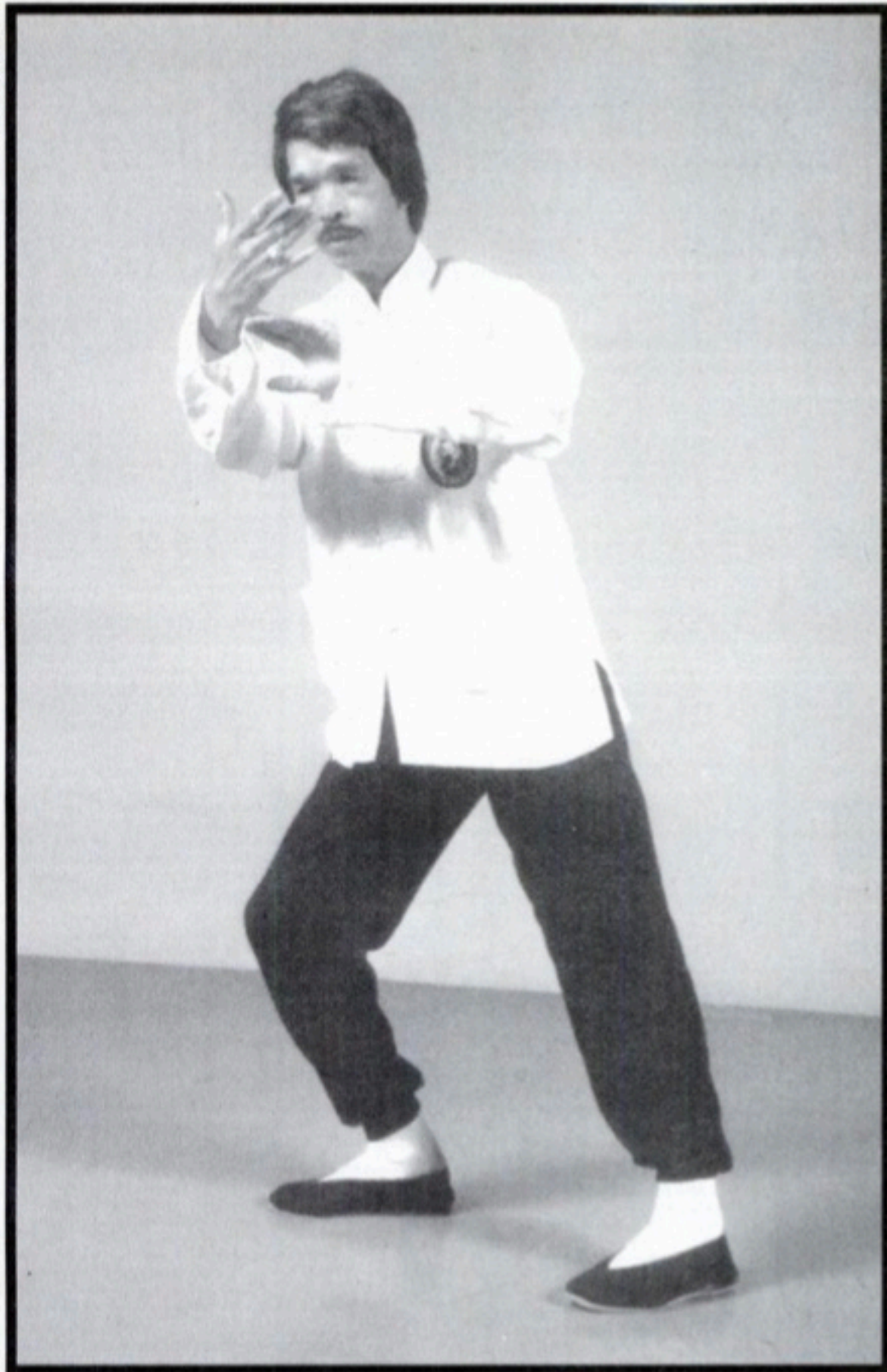
tor paid Bruce a visit at the school. The kung fu instructor was fresh off the boat from Hong Kong and was eager to establish a name for himself in San Francisco. He reportedly handed Bruce an ornate scroll announcing a challenge in Chinese. It was an ultimatum from the city's kung fu community demanding that, if Lee lost the fight, he would either close his school or stop teaching Caucasians.

Bruce agreed to fight, which seemed to stun the challenger and his cohorts. Apparently, they had taken Lee for a "pa-

per tiger" who would back down if challenged by a skilled practitioner. The kung fu stylist allegedly tried to soften his harsh message, suggesting a sparring session instead. But Lee would not hear of it. "No, you challenged me, so let's fight!" he said.

The challenger then reportedly suggested establishing a set of rules for the match, such as no hitting the face, and no kicking to the groin. But the quick-tempered Lee refused to listen. "I'm not standing for any of that!" he declared. "You've come here with an ultimatum and a challenge, hoping to scare me off. You've made the challenge, so I'm making the rules. As far as I'm concerned, it's no holds barred. It's all out!"

Lee and the challenger then formally



bowed and began to fight, with Lee reportedly delivering a series of straight-forward wing chun punches. Within a minute or so, the challenger's supporters tried to stop the fight, but James Lee held them back, telling them to let the bout continue. Bruce continued to attack, forcing his opponent to backpedal. The challenger allegedly turned and began to run away, but Lee went after him and reportedly brought him to the floor and began pounding him. "Is that enough?" Bruce shouted at his opponent.

"That's enough!" the challenger reportedly answered. Lee then ordered the challenger and his entourage out of the school and never heard from them again. The fight had lasted only three minutes.

Hawkins Cheung (above), who roamed the streets of Hong Kong with Bruce Lee (above right) when both were youngsters, claims that Lee fought often in those days, winning some bouts, losing others.

Another encounter took place in Seattle several years earlier. Lee's time in Seattle, from 1959-1964, was perhaps the most creative period of his life. He trained relentlessly and eventually carved out his own niche in martial arts. He wrote the book *Kung Fu: The Philosophical Art of Self-Defense* and began giving kung fu demonstrations in the area, stirring up interest among the public.

One of Lee's friends and students in Seattle was Ed Hart, who was on hand when Lee got into a tussle with a chal-

lenger in Seattle. "What happened was, this Japanese karate man—I don't think he was too bright—had been agitating Bruce for several weeks," Hart recalls. "He attended the same school as Bruce—Edison Technical School—and was a native Japanese who was only in the United States to go to school. He started making remarks about Bruce's kung fu, agitating Bruce, and finally challenged him to a fight. Bruce said 'I don't want to fight you,' and he just tried to avoid the guy. But the guy kept agitating him, and he told several friends that his karate was better than Bruce's kung fu. Some of the guy's friends were also friendly with me and Bruce, and they told us what was going on. Bruce kept saying that he didn't want to fight the guy, and finally this guy said something—I don't remember what it was—that really got Bruce angry, and Bruce finally agreed to fight him.

"They decided to meet in a handball court at the Seattle YMCA on Fourth Avenue," Hart continues. "They agreed that I



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would be the timekeeper, and [Lee's friend and student] Jesse [Glover] would be the referee. I remember that the Japanese guy had to get into his karate uniform and prepare. Bruce was just dressed in regular street clothes. I was holding my watch, and Bruce and this guy faced each other. We made sure everyone was ready, and I said 'Okay, begin!'

"For a second, neither one of them moved," Hart relates. "The Japanese guy went into a 'cat stance' and suddenly kicked at Bruce, who brushed the kick aside and punched him, and kept on punching him, and punched him into a wall. The guy hit the wall very hard, and Bruce kept on punching him, and the guy's face just turned into blood. The guy shifted

a little bit, trying to get away from Bruce, but Bruce slammed him into the center of the court and kept right on him, and the guy started to drop. Bruce kicked him in the head as he was dropping, and the guy flipped over on his back. I was astounded. I had only known Bruce for a few months, and he had repeatedly amazed me with the stuff he'd shown me, but I had never seen him in a fight before, and I think everyone there was stunned by it. This guy was lying there flat on his back, and I just stood there staring at him. I was absolutely dumbfounded! Finally, the guys got together and dragged the karate guy over to a wall and sort of leaned him up against it. They didn't think it was a good idea to try to stand him up.

"After a while, his eyelids fluttered and he opened his eyes, looked up at me, and said 'How long did it take him to defeat me?' I knew how long it was—it was 11 seconds—but I looked at this poor guy, and I just didn't have the heart to tell him. So I doubled the time, and I said to him 'Uh, 22 seconds.' And the guy groaned 'Aaaah' and fell back unconscious again! I'll never forget that."

Hart, Glover and their friend Howard Hall were still talking about the fight later that day at Hart and Glover's house. Hall, who was six-foot-four, 195 pounds, and had been raised in tough section of Newark, New Jersey, looked at Hart and said "Damn it, Hart, that guy [Lee] is dangerous!"

"Bruce, who was only five-foot-seven and 132 pounds, had Hall completely intimidated," Hart recalls.

Although he never witnessed Lee in actual combat, former Seattle student James DeMile was impressed by Lee's lightning-fast wing chun skills when he met the "Little Dragon" at a kung fu demonstration at Edison Technical School. During the demo, DeMile was asked to hit Lee as hard as he could. DeMile tried, but was helpless against Lee.

"I have heard stories about Bruce being beaten [in real fights], but I knew Bruce well enough that if he *had* been beaten, it would have literally psychologically destroyed him. So I don't believe it," Demile relates.

According to Glover, "Most of those who put down Bruce are people who have a need to elevate themselves over other people. They live in a world that is not real."

Glover chastises those who criticize Lee because he didn't fight in tournaments. "Tournaments have rules and regulations; they are not fights," he says. "When you fight somebody, there are no rules. Many of the people who win in boxing, kickboxing and other events would not win in actual



There are those who claim that Bruce Lee (punching, above) was not so much a great martial artist as he was an actor who could make the martial arts look great on film.

streetfights. If you lose in the street, it can cost you your life. Somebody could just keep on kicking your brain until you are dead. The streets are loaded with people who would beat the crap out of most martial artists. These are people who fight all of the time, and they seldom lose.

"When tournaments first started coming out around here, the fighters didn't make contact," Glover continues. "Bruce used to look at that and say 'How in the hell can you tell whether you did something right?' But people will think what they want to think, and there's not much

you can do about it."

Glover notes that, over the years, a number of great boxers have paid tribute to Lee's skills. "I have read where [Muhammad] Ali, 'Sugar' Ray Leonard and [former lightweight contender] Mike Quarry have all said very positive things about Bruce," Glover relates. "True, those people never actually saw Bruce fight, but they were able to tell that Bruce was for real by watching him move in his films. A skilled fighter can see those things right away."

In a 1982 *Playboy* interview, former champion Leonard said "In a sense, my left jab comes from [Bruce Lee]. After watching Lee, I became much more precise about landing my jabs on an opponent's nose or between his eyes. I also got some moves—both offensive and defensive—from him. For instance, he'd let a punch come within a fraction of an inch of his face, and then he'd slip it and pop the guy. I tried to emulate that. So Bruce Lee played a role in my professional career as a fighter."

Those who criticize Lee's fighting ability should remember that his normal training routine included rigorous contact sparring sessions in which the fighters attempted to take one another out. Lee's training was always as close to combat reality as possible. Lee was including full-contact sparring sessions in his training routine long before other martial artists ever did.


Was Lee a "real" fighter, or simply a product of his films? To the handful of individuals fortunate enough to train with the Little Dragon, there is not a shadow of doubt in their minds that Lee could handle himself on the street against anyone. Glover claims it is hard for him to imagine anyone posing a serious physical threat



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to Lee. Glover admits, however, that, in the eyes of a lot of people, Lee was not so much a great martial artist, but rather an actor who could make the martial arts look good on film.

One thing is certain, however, Lee's impact on the martial arts community is as strong today as it was 20 years ago. His films continue to entertain audiences the world over. He is still the standard by which all great martial artists are measured.



PHOTO COURTESY OF WILLIAM CHEUNG

William Cheung (above), who grew up with Bruce Lee in Hong Kong and introduced the latter to wing chun kung fu instructor Yip Man, claims Lee often picked fights on the streets as a youth.

Could Bruce Lee take care of himself on the street? He thought so. When asked that question in what turned out to be his final Hong Kong interview in 1973, he answered "If I tell you I'm good, you'll probably say I'm boasting. But if I tell you I'm no good, one knows I'm lying!"

About the author: Thomas Nilsson is a Handen, Sweden-based martial artist and freelance writer who is making his first contribution to *Black Belt*.

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